

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE & FISHERIES
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Waterfowl Population Estimates
in Louisiana's Coastal Zone Below
U.S. Highway 90 and on Catahoula Lake.

Date: Coastal Zone, December 12-13, 2005,
Catahoula Lake & NE Louisiana,
December 9-10, 2005

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December 16, 2005

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Estimates made from Aircraft (*) Estimate less than 1,000

SPECIES	SOUTHWEST	SOUTHEAST	CATAHOULA LAKE	TOTALS
MALLARD	137,000	60,000	8,000	205,000
MOTTLED	30,000	18,000	*	48,000
GADWALL	162,000	718,000	*	880,000
WIGEON	4,000	13,000	5,000	22,000
GW TEAL	117,000	192,000	2,000	311,000
BW TEAL	40,000	42,000	*	82,000
SHOVELER	181,000	40,000	*	221,000
PINTAIL	145,000	178,000	67,000	391,000
TOTAL DABBLERS	815,000	1,261,000	83,000	2,160,000
SCAUP	58,000	29,000	2,000	89,000
RINGNECKED	37,000	150,000	53,000	240,000
CANVASBACK	*	67,000	40,000	107,000
TOTAL DIVERS	95,000	246,000	95,000	435,000
TOTAL DUCKS	910,000	1,507,000	178,000	2,595,000
COOTS	75,000	692,000	*	768,000

COMMENTS:

The estimate of 2.6 million ducks recorded on this survey is twice that of last month, 50% higher than last year's December estimate of 1.7 million, and is the highest estimate for December since 2000. It is 25% higher than the average of the previous 5-years (2.1 million) and is just slightly lower than the long-term December average of 2.7 million. Although most species remain at or below long-term average, much higher than average numbers of northern shovelers, ring-necked ducks, and canvasbacks were counted. Total duck numbers in southwest Louisiana were slightly higher than last year's estimate of 842,000, so the larger total estimate comes from big increases at Catahoula Lake (26,000 in 2004) and southeast Louisiana (791,000 in 2004).

One species observation to note is the count of scaup. The conditions during our survey were almost dead-calm and we had excellent visibility off-shore at the southern end of each transect where traditionally many, often very large, groups of scaup are seen. Although we counted 30% more scaup than the December long-term average, we saw virtually no scaup offshore. Furthermore, a record low of only 1,000 scaup were estimated during our special scaup survey on Lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne on December 12. Like other species, scaup appear to have redistributed in more inland sites.

An additional 120,000 ducks and 238,000 geese (10% White-fronted) were counted in selected habitats of northeast Louisiana which was up substantially from November's count of 21,000 ducks and 50,000 mostly white-fronted geese. This is a similar number of ducks and many more geese (127,000 and 128,000 respectively) compared to December 2004. In contrast to last year, when Catahoula Lake was more than 10 feet over desired water level, with extensive backwater flooding and abundant flooded agricultural fields, central and northeastern Louisiana are still very dry. Wetlands are largely limited to managed sites, and more area is available since our last survey, but the landscape is still much drier than normal.

We counted another 23,000 ducks on the northwest Louisiana survey, primarily on the locks, lakes, and oxbows along the Red River and upper Toledo Bend, which was higher than both the 12,000 counted last month and the 16,000 counted in December of last year. Gadwalls, mallards, and canvasbacks, in that order, were the most abundant species.

The large influx of ducks into the State since the November survey is undoubtedly due to recent severe cold fronts bringing freezing temperatures and snow to northern and mid-latitude areas of the Central and Mississippi Flyway. Combined with persistent drought to the north, conditions were favorable for waterfowl migration into Louisiana. . Our surveys commenced a few days following a strong frontal passage December 4-5.

Large sections of marsh in both southwestern and southeastern Louisiana remain devoid of ducks. However, other areas that appear from the air to be dead and rotting are hosting good numbers of ducks. Still, very large concentrations of ducks were found mostly in areas of intact fresh marsh and flooded agricultural lands that were spared the damages of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The marshes of upper Terrebonne basin and north of Lake Salvador continue to hold many ducks as do the flooded agricultural areas of Cameron and Vermilion Parishes. We noted however, that although there is more flooded habitat than in November, many fields are just now wet enough to begin holding water attractive to ducks. We expect another few inches of rain will increase available habitat in that region substantially.